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## THE HISTORY OF BETTING

It feels like an eternity since Neymar banged in that third goal for Barcelona in the Champions League Final, doesn't it? Thankfully, the new football season is edging ever closer and excitement levels are reaching their gagging-for-it peak as we count down the days. While the majority of fans are 100% consumed with on-the-field thoughts like Bastian Schweinsteiger's ability to pull the strings for Manchester United or Aston Villa's hopes of coping without Christian Benteke and Fabian Delph amongst their rank, for an increasing number of other fans, thoughts turn to numbers, odds and prices.

Yes, it's not just football that returns this summer, it's betting too. And make no mistake about it, betting is big business in the lucrative, obsessive, seven-days-a-week environment that football now bathes in. Once a social sore, football betting has now been embraced by the sport, government, media and the majority of society. But how did we reach this point? What triggered this huge change in attitude and perception?

Let's rewind back to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Betting really only focused on two sports – horse racing and greyhound racing. Wagers on these events were housed at the racing tracks or in betting shops dotted around the country. The shops weren't particularly welcoming venues; there was an edginess to them (especially in the cities) that resembled the rougher pubs of the area. Men were men, women seldom dared enter and you had to pay tax on every bet struck. Horrible, eh? Gradually though, things improved – shop televisions were introduced in 1987, Sunday and evening opening kicked-off in the first half of the 1990's and they even scrapped betting tax in 2001.

Football though, that was an afterthought when it came to betting. The pools (ask your Dad) was what ruled the roost back in these simple times. When the trade betting paper, the Racing Post, was launched in 1986 they ran with just three pages on sport outside horses and greyhounds. Now on a busy Saturday, it can be up to 40.

What kicked-off the huge interest in football betting? Well, I'm sure you're very familiar with this tale. Back in 1992 satellite television channel Sky Sports bought the rights to England's top division for a mind-blowing (at the time) £304m. Out went Elton Welsby and John Bumstead and in came the insight of Andy Gray and pin-up looks of Ryan Giggs. As Sky said themselves, this was a whole new ball game.

The key to this revolution when it came to betting was scale. During ITV's last season of holding the rights to the top division they broadcast a live league game most weekends during the season but certainly not on all of them. Sky were now planning to transmit one every Sunday and one every Monday. Live games were the real shop window for betting companies to promote football betting, so this increase was most welcome. You know the rest...football got sexy and Manchester United got to No.1 in the charts.

Initially though, the bookmaking industry were slow to react to this surge of interest in football. While new football coupons and marketing material had started to be stocked in betting shops, the industry had a tight grip on how people could bet on football. For starters, if you wanted to place a bet on just one team they had to be playing live on TV for your bet to be accepted. Any bets placed on non-live games had to be bracketed alongside two other selections. This was known as the minimum trebles rule. Things were changing though, in the mid-90's in-running betting was launched, this allowed punters to bet on a live TV game as it was happening. Taken for granted two decades on, this was a huge innovation back then and, with more and more games being broadcast live, interest was growing.

The other key event in the explosion of football betting came with the birth and subsequent enormous growth of the internet at the gate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Suddenly the twin joys of being able to bet at home and take more competitive odds via a surfeit of new online-only operators made betting a whole lot more palatable to the younger generation. Top that up with the fact betting tax was abolished in 2001 and it really was a game-changer.

Now from being hugely restricted in the 90's, the new millennium birthed a brand new kind of football betting where anything goes! Now you could bet on the next corner, a team to lose, a player to score a goal at any time, hell you could even back East Stirling to beat Elgin as a single bet. The dark days were over and betting had been liberated.

Suddenly the staid nature of the old traditional betting shop guard had been replaced by exciting new brands like Paddy Power, Betfair and Bet365. These firms tapped into this new generation and made betting sound exciting and aspirational for casual football fans. More and more innovations were introduced as these tech-savvy companies embraced the online world. Exchange betting, live streaming and the cash-out facility turned the landscape into an exciting and alluring one for football fans.

The wider media picked up on this and odds became a regular accompaniment to the action itself. As well as reporting on team news for a live match, Sky Sports would also quote the match odds. This would have been unthinkable 20 years previous. Huge steps had been made. While horse racing saw its market share depleted, football betting went from strength to strength, just like the sport itself.

In-running (or in-play) betting has added a new exciting strand to gambling where a huge twist in a match can have exciting or devastating consequences. Perhaps the most famous football turnaround of this century took place in the 2005 Champions League final when Liverpool, 3-0 down at half-time, came back to draw 3-3 before eventually winning on penalties. Joy for the Anfield club of course but a sickening nightmare for one Norwegian punter who placed £10,167 on

AC Milan at odds of 1/100 with William Hill when they went 3-0 up. Those odds indicate players will win £1 for every £100 staked, so our friend from Oslo was due paltry winnings of £101.67 if AC Milan had gone on to lift the trophy.

On the flip side though, that game also created some amazing winning stories for football punters. Again at William Hill, one lucky chap placed £50 on Liverpool to win the trophy at odds of 100/1 when they were down (and seemingly sunk) at half-time.

Football betting has got smart too. Many punters use stats and data to frame their wagers. As well as becoming a socially acceptable strand of entertainment, betting on football is also a true battle of wits between bookmaker and customer. Opta Stats have become a visible presence on a number of bookmaker websites as more and more punters adopt data to make profit. Brentford FC have adopted a model that uses analytics, data and stats to further their progress and it's no big surprise to discover that owner Matthew Benham has his roots firmly in the gambling industry.

In 2015, putting a football bet on has become a staple part of the weekend for a huge number of fans. You don't have to enter a smoky shop and it's pretty straight-forward to follow. Football betting now finds itself as the key product for betting companies. More operators are forming, while our viewing time is clogged up with more and more adverts from these companies. Last year's World Cup brought in around £1 billion worth of turnover in the UK. Recession, what recession? There's no doubt the growth in the sport itself has fuelled this boom along with the birth of the internet. The days when gambling was a naughty secret have long gone.

**Mark O'Haire is the owner of [WeLoveBettingUK](http://welovebetting.co.uk/)**

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